Origins and Stigmatization of Black English

Linguistics is the scientific study of language.[1] Vernaculars or dialects within a language are usually characterized by being a deviation from its standard version. These variations are typically perceived as informal, rather than a speech alternative and/or addition, not necessarily because of the vernacular or dialect itself, but because of the people and communities that utilize them.

This stigmatization is particular to speakers of Black English because its origin is heavily influenced by socio-historical factors. Linguist Donald Winford writes that the earliest forms of Black English were formed in Maryland and Virginia (Upper South) as well as the Carolinas and Georgia (Lower South) during the early 17th century. The large population size of enslaved people near White settlers caused an influence of British English dialects on their speech, but there was also influence from African languages and various creoles.[2] This evidence shows that the origins of Black English were a result of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Therefore, Black English, whether considered its own language or just a dialect, holds historical and cultural weight that must be considered when discussing the various ways in which Black people use English.

In 1996, the Oakland School System in California came to recognize "Black English" as its own separate language rather than a dialect of English to empower and improve the language education for African American students.[3] [4] Instead of forcing Black students to conform to standard English, they were allowed to use the language they spoke at home in school; a place they were told for the longest time their first language was not appropriate to speak. Until this point, thinking about Black language in this way amongst the public was unheard of; the study of Black English was only a conversation amongst academic circles.[5]

Despite this effort, the narrative of codeswitching has prevailed. For speakers of Black English, that means that their native tongue is not permitted in academic and professional settings, but it is acceptable to speak among family, friends, and other informal settings.[6] A study from the Pew Research Center found that "48% of Black adults with a bachelor's degree say they often or sometimes feel the need to codeswitch" and 37% of Black adults without a bachelor's degree feel the same.[7] Dr. April Baker-Bell questions why speakers of Black English are forced

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[1] John Lyons' "Linguistics" in Encyclopedia Brittanica (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2023)

[2] Sonja L. Lanehart's The Oxford Handbook of African American Language (Oxford University Press, 2015)

[3] There are several other names for Black English which include Ebonics, Black Language, African American Language (AAL), African American English (AAE), African American Vernacular English (AAVE). AAVE is the most popular term in non-academic circles. Individual linguistic scholars use various terms according to their preference.

[4] Rene Sanchez's "Oakland School System Recognizes 'Black English' as Second Language" in The Washington Post, December 20, 1996

[5] John McWhorter's Talking Back, Talking Black: Truths About America's Lingua Franca (Bellueve Literary Press, 2016)

[6] Vershawn Ashanti Young "Should Writers Use They Own English?" in Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies, vol. 12, no. 1, 2010

[7] "Younger, college-educated black Americans are most likely to feel need to 'code-switch'," Pew Research Center (https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/09/24/younger-college-educated-black-americans-are-most-likely-to-feel-need-to-code-switch/)

to be "bidialectal" while white mainstream English speakers are only expected to be "monodialectal."[8] Black people speaking Black English has traditionally been perceived as an unintelligent and "ghetto" way of speaking. This stigmatization can only be broken if these negative descriptors are no longer associated with Black Americans, whether they speak Black English or not.

[8] April Baker-Bell's Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy (Routledge, 2020)